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## *The Factive Turn in Epistemology*

Veli Mitova (ed.)

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### **False Beliefs and The Reasons We Don't Have**

**Maria Alvarez**

#### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have seen intense debates among philosophers about virtually every aspect of reasons: what they are, to whom they apply and when, how and why they justify, demand, guide or explain the range of things they justify, demand, guide or explain, such as actions, beliefs, desires, other attitudes and emotions. One outcome of those debates is the ‘factive turn’: a shift towards ‘factualism’, the view that reasons for acting or believing or wanting, or other attitudes—what are often called ‘normative’ or ‘justifying’ reasons<sup>1</sup> – are facts.<sup>2</sup>

The consensus is, of course, not universal.<sup>3</sup> For example, some authors, whom I shall call ‘anti-factualists’, have attempted to undermine it by urging a distinction between the reasons *there are* that favour someone’s doing something and the reasons one *has* that favour her doing that thing. They accept that the former must be facts. But they claim that, given a particular understanding of that distinction, considerations about the rationality and explanation of action

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<sup>1</sup> In the current reasons terminology, a *normative* reason is a reason (for someone) do something, in the sense that it favours someone’s doing that thing. A *motivating* reason is a reason for which someone does something. This paper is about normative reasons, specifically about whether a falsehood can be a normative reason one has.

<sup>2</sup> This view, though perhaps articulated using different terms, is endorsed and defended by Alvarez (2010, 2016a); Hornsby (2007, 2008); Hyman (1999, 2011, 2015); Littlejohn (2014, 2012); Raz (1975, 1999, 2013); Unger (1975) and Williamson (2000 and *in press*), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Not all of those who endorse the consensus share the same conception of facts. Some say that facts are true propositions or truths, while others think they are the truth-makers of true propositions. And one also finds facts described as obtaining states of affairs. In my discussion here I ignore these differences and talk simply about reasons being facts or truths, since the question at the centre of the paper is whether a false belief, that is a false proposition, a falsehood, can ever be a reason that favours acting, and factualists would agree that it cannot.

show that some reasons one has that favour actions, beliefs and other attitudes are false beliefs rather than facts. Comesaña and McGrath, for example, write:

there are cases in which a consideration *p* is a reason one has to do something and yet *p* is false and so not a fact. (Comesaña & McGrath 2014: 60)<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I argue that their arguments fail: false beliefs are not reasons that favour anything and, therefore, they cannot be among the reasons we have. The next section clarifies some preliminary matters in order to sharpen up the debate under examination. In section 9.3, I explain the distinction anti-factualists urge between reasons there are and reasons one has, identifying two senses in which one can be said to have a reason that are relevant to this distinction. In Section 9.4 I argue that neither sense of having a reason supports the claim that a reason can be both a false proposition and something that favours actions. Section 9.4 shows that factualism can accommodate considerations about the rationality and explanation of action that are supposed to demand exceptions to factualism. I conclude that the arguments examined don't show that anyone has a reason to abandon factualism.

## 9.2 PRELIMINARIES

The disagreement under consideration concerns reasons in all domains: practical reasons (reasons for acting, wanting, etc.), epistemic reasons (reasons for believing something), as well as reasons for other attitudes, emotions, and for anything else in which we are responsive to reasons. Like my opponents, I articulate my arguments in relation to reasons for action, but I take my conclusions to apply to all 'reasons for', i.e. reasons for believing, wanting, and other attitudes. Like most participants in this debate, I see no grounds for thinking that reasons for acting are peculiar in this respect: if all reasons for acting are facts, it is plausible to suppose that all reasons for believing, wanting, etc. are also facts. And vice versa: if some reasons for acting

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<sup>4</sup> And they conclude that

reasons are considerations—true or false—that favor or support a person doing (believing, feeling, etc.) something (Ibid, 76).

Using the current terminology, their view is that some normative reasons one has are false beliefs. Schroeder (2008) also argues that the reasons one has, which he calls 'subjective reasons', can be false beliefs. (I take Schroeder to be arguing about the normative, and not just the motivating, reasons one has.) Drake (this volume) takes the more radical view that, both normative reasons there are, and normative reasons one has can be falsehoods. (All these authors would also hold that motivating reasons can be false beliefs. As do, for instance Dancy (2000, 2011) and Turri (2009), who sometimes put the point in terms of good reasons, which must be facts, and bad reasons, which needn't be. I discuss that view in Alvarez (2016a)).

are not facts but are, say, false beliefs, then it seems plausible that some reasons for believing, wanting, etc. are also false beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

In assessing whether reasons can be false beliefs, it is helpful to bear in mind that the term ‘belief’ is used to talk about different things:

- (i) *the fact* that one believes something;
- (ii) *the mental state* of believing something; and
- (iii) *what* one believes, also called ‘the content’ of a belief.

For instance, if Amita believes that the Ganges will flood again next year, the phrase ‘Amita’s belief’ may be used to refer to (i) the fact that Amita believes that the Ganges will flood again next year; or (ii) Amita’s mental state of believing that the Ganges will flood again next year; or (iii) what Amita believes, namely, that the Ganges will flood again next year, which is also called ‘the content of her belief’. Throughout this discussion, the term ‘belief’ is used only in the third sense, that is, to talk about what someone believes, ‘the content’. I shall use ‘the fact that A believes that p’ and ‘A’s believing that such and such’ for (i) and (ii), respectively.

Since it is widely held that the contents of beliefs are propositions, the claim that some reasons that favour actions are false beliefs is also taken to be equivalent to the claim that some reasons for action are false propositions, or falsehoods. Accordingly, opponents of factualism think that some reasons are true beliefs, that is, true propositions or facts or truths, while other reasons are false beliefs, that is, false propositions or falsehoods.

It will be helpful, finally, to briefly rehearse one of the central arguments in support of the view that reasons for acting are facts.<sup>6</sup> The argument depends on a claim about the connection between the concept of a reason for acting and the good. It goes roughly as follows. Reasons for actions are reasons that favour those actions. And reasons favour actions because they identify good-making features of those actions.<sup>7</sup> For instance, suppose that closing the floodgates will prevent the floodwater from ruining the crops. The fact that it will prevent the ruin of the crops is a good-making feature of the action of closing the gates. So that fact is a reason for that action. If it were false that closing the gates would prevent the ruin of the crops,

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<sup>5</sup> For more ambitious arguments for the ‘unity’ of reasons, see Gibbons (2010) and Littlejohn (2014).

<sup>6</sup> For further arguments, or different versions of similar arguments, see the authors listed in fn. 1.

<sup>7</sup> The rightness of believing concerns truth rather than the good. For a fuller discussion, see Alvarez (2010: 14ff.).

then the action of closing the gates wouldn't have that good-making feature. If so, there wouldn't be *that* reason for closing the floodgates, since it wouldn't be a fact that closing the gates would be good in that respect. Thus, the connection between reasons for acting and the goodness of the corresponding action supports the view that reasons for action must be facts or truths. And since reasons for acting are reasons for *someone* to act, we can conclude that the reasons there are for someone to act must be facts or truths.<sup>8</sup>

Some opponents of factualism concede that these considerations show that the reasons there are for someone to act must be facts. But, as noted above, they think the story is different when it comes to the reasons a person *has* for acting. Concerning those, they say, a false belief – that is, a false proposition that the person believes – can also favour or support their acting. In order to assess that claim, and the arguments that support it, we need a clearer grasp of the allegedly crucial distinction between reasons there are and reasons one has.

### 9.3 REASONS THERE ARE AND REASONS ONE HAS

Although opponents of factualism accord great significance to the distinction between there being a reason for you to do something and your having a reason to do it, one may be sceptical. Surely, one might think, the difference is purely stylistic: those two phrases are simply two ways of expressing the same idea. For, if there is a reason for you to do something, then you have a reason to do it, and vice versa. For example, if the fact that the guests have arrived is a reason there is for the host to start serving drinks, then it is a reason the host has for starting to serve drinks. And he has that reason just by virtue of the mere fact that there is that reason for him to start serving drinks. Suppose I say to you that the fact that the guests have arrived is a reason for the host to start serving the drinks. You could hardly reply: 'Yes, the arrival of the guests is a reason for the host to start serving drinks, but the host has no reason to start serving drinks'. Or at any rate, your reply would be baffling because, at least on the face of it, self-contradictory.

Defenders of the distinction think that the interlocutor's remarks are not, despite appearances, paradoxical. And, they argue, given a proper understanding of the distinction

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the discussion in this paper, I leave aside several issues that are tangential to my discussion. One is whether facts that are, in some sense, unknowable, relative to a time and/or a group of people, can be reasons that there are for that group. For a discussion see Raz (2011). Another is whether the reasons there are for someone to act depend in any way on their desires or, more widely, on their 'motivational set' as suggested by Bernard Williams (1981, 1995). I also disregard issues about when and why a reason for someone to do something is defeated by reasons not to do that thing.

between reasons there are and reasons one has, it is easy to see why it is not so. The following passage introduces the distinction by reference to considerations of rationality:

In some cases there is a reason for one to do or believe something, but because one has no inkling of this reason, it doesn't matter to the rationality of one's actions or beliefs. If you are sitting in a building which has just caught fire, there is a very good reason for you to leave as quickly as possible; but if you have no idea that anything is unusual, you might be quite rational to stay put where you are. In this case there exists a reason for you to do something, but, because you do not 'have' or 'possess' that reason, it does not affect what you are rational to do. This example thus shows that there can be reasons for one to do something which don't affect rationality because they are not 'had' (Comesaña and McGrath 2014: 59).

The passage directs our attention to the undeniable fact that there may be reasons for you to do something but that you may not be aware of those reasons – there are reasons of which you have 'no inkling'. And it also makes a claim about how the lack of awareness of a reason affects the rationality of actions. Suppose we accept that you might be rational to stay put because you're not aware of the reason to leave as quickly as possible. Does it follow from this that there is a genuine and important distinction between reasons there are for one to do something and reasons one has to do it?

It is not clear that it does, at least on the most natural understanding of what it takes to have a reason. For it is perfectly plausible to argue that in the example in the passage, you *do* have a reason to leave as quickly as possible, namely that the building is on fire – it's just that you are not aware of that reason. And that's why it is rational for you not to leave: you don't know about the reason you have. So the case described in the passage only shows that there can be reasons you have to do something even though you lack awareness of those reasons: you're not aware that there are such reasons for you to act, and also not aware that you have them. If you become aware of the fire, you learn a fact that is a reason there *was* for you to leave before you knew about it but, arguably, that is *also* a reason you *had*. You just didn't know it.

To defenders of the distinction this reply may seem wilfully obtuse. For it is clear that Comesaña's and McGrath's claim that there are reasons you don't *have* is to be construed in a particular way, namely as meaning that there are reasons you're not *aware of*: to have a reason, in this sense, is to be aware of it. Mark Schroeder, who also urges the importance of the distinction, makes the point explicitly. According to Schroeder, there are two senses of 'have',

which he calls the ‘pleonastic’ and the ‘non-pleonastic’ sense, respectively.<sup>9</sup> The non-pleonastic sense of ‘having’ is at work in saying, for example, that Helena has a ticket to the opera. It is non-pleonastic in as much as the remark can be ‘factored out’ into the claim that there is a ticket to the opera, and the claim that it is in Helena’s possession—she *has* it. Similarly, he adds, ‘if one has a golf partner, this can only be because there is someone who is a golf partner, and one *has* him’. But there is an important difference between the two cases, he says, for

here, it is not like there are people out there who have the property of being golf partners, and one is in your possession. Rather, being a golf partner is simply a relational property, and the golf partner you have—your golf partner—is simply the one who stands in the *golf partner of relation to you* (Schroeder 2008: 57).

This example illustrates the sense of having. And, according to Schroeder, claims like those I make above that you *had* a reason to leave the burning building, namely that the building is on fire, involve the pleonastic sense of ‘have’. And that is also the sense in which, Schroeder says, Ronnie, who likes dancing but doesn’t know that there will be dancing at the party tonight, ‘counts as having’ a reason to go to the party:

This case is like the case of having a father or having a golf partner. It is not that Ronnie counts as *having* this reason because it is a reason that he in some way possesses—on the contrary, as stipulated, Ronnie knows nothing about the fact that there will be dancing at the party tonight. In this case, it counts as a reason that Ronnie has to go to the party, simply because Ronnie is the person to whom it stands in the *reason for* relation (Schroeder 2008: 59).

Thus, when Comesaña and McGrath deny that you have a reason to leave the building, they are using ‘have’ in the non-pleonastic sense. It is also that sense of ‘have’ that Schroeder is using when he says that, although both Ronnie and Freddie like dancing, Freddie but not Ronnie ‘has’ a reason to go to the party because only Freddie knows that there will be dancing there. This sense, Schroeder says, is the relation between a reason and a person ‘that philosophers now typically pick out by talking about the *reasons* that someone *has*’ (Schroeder 2008: 57).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The claim that you have a reason is not pleonastic in the sense that it contains superfluous words, as does for example, ‘I saw it with my own eyes’, or ‘free gift’. Schroeder’s point is that saying that A has a reason to do something in the pleonastic sense adds nothing not already expressed by saying that there is a reason for A to do that thing. I agree with Schroeder but I shall argue that, contrary to what he claims, one cannot have a reason that favours actions in the non-pleonastic sense, unless one has it in the pleonastic sense.

<sup>10</sup> Schroeder’s target is what he calls ‘the Factoring Account’ of having reasons, roughly the idea that ‘you have a reason to do something’, in the non-pleonastic sense, should be construed as: ‘there is a reason for you to do

It is true that philosophers often express the idea of someone's being aware of a reason that applies to them in terms of 'having a reason'. And, if one has this usage of 'having reasons' in mind, one can say that there is a real distinction between there being a reason for someone to do something and that person's 'having' a reason to do it. But two things should be noted about this. One is that talk of 'having reasons' to mean 'being aware of reasons' is a secondary and not wholly idiomatic sense – as is evinced by the fact that those who use it feel the need to put the verbs 'have', 'possess', etc. in inverted commas. And that is because the most natural interpretation of the claim that one has a reason is the pleonastic sense, the sense in which for someone to have a reason is just for there to be a reason that applies to that person. The non-pleonastic sense of having or possessing reasons to mean being aware of them is primarily a philosophical turn of phrase.<sup>11</sup> Philosophers can, of course, use the terms 'having reasons' in this sense if they wish, but one should not lose sight in these debates of the fact that to say that someone 'has' (or 'hasn't') a reason in the philosophical, non-pleonastic sense just described, simply means that they are (or aren't) aware of a reason that applies to them.

The second, related but more important point is that this non-pleonastic sense of 'having a reason' is an *epistemic* sense (and I shall call it that); a sense that is, therefore, dependent on the pleonastic sense. And the nature of this dependence is crucial for the debate about factualism. To see this, consider again the examples used earlier. Both describe situations in which there is a reason for an agent to act, which is a fact; and the question whether that agent has or doesn't have that reason is a question about whether the agent is or is not aware of it, that is, aware or not of the relevant fact. Thus, the fact that the building is on fire is a reason for you to leave quickly but since you have no inkling of the fact, you don't 'have' this reason. And the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for both Freddie and Ronnie to go to the party, but since only Freddie is aware of the fact, only Freddie 'has' the reason. In both

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[that thing] which you have—which is somehow in your possession or grasp' (Schroeder 2008: 57). Schroeder agrees that the reasons there are for you to do something are facts. As will become clear in section 3, I accept the Factoring Account.

<sup>11</sup> Errol Lord, who defends the Factoring Account against Schroeder's arguments, makes reference to this philosophical talk of 'having' or 'possessing' reasons, and he adds: 'Unfortunately, this isn't always how we use *having reasons* talk. It is common for philosophers to say that agents have reasons even when those reasons aren't possessed by those agents.' (Lord 2010: 283-4) Lord is right that it is unfortunate that philosophers have these two ways of using having reasons, since the dual usage sometimes invites confusion about the import of a claim that someone has a reason. However, the way he puts it seems to me to get things the wrong way round. For describing agents as having reasons, when one means that there are reasons that apply to them, 'even when those reasons aren't possessed by those agents', is a perfectly ordinary use of that expression. What is primarily a philosophical way of using the phrase, is talk of 'having' or 'possessing' reasons to mean being aware of the reasons that apply to one.



cases, the question whether the agents have the reason in the epistemic sense arises only because they have it in the pleonastic sense: the reason is there for them to ‘have’, i.e. to be aware of.

Philosophers disagree about what is required for you to be aware of a reason. Some say that you need to *know* the fact that is the reason because, among other things, having a reason should put you in a position to act for that reason. And, they argue, nothing short of knowledge of the fact that is a reason puts you in a position to act for that reason – a notion that they characterise in terms of being guided by, or acting in light of the reason.<sup>12</sup> The dissenting voices claim that the knowledge condition is too strong and that you can have the sort of awareness of a reason required to act for that reason when you merely have a true belief about, rather than knowledge of, a fact.<sup>13</sup> But, whichever is correct, you can ‘have a reason’ in the epistemic sense only if the reason you ‘have’ is a fact, i.e. if you have it in the pleonastic sense.

So it should be clear that this epistemic sense of having only sanctions the following claim:

**The Epistemic Claim about Having Reasons:** Among the reasons that there are that favour your doing something, there are some you have (are aware of) and some you don’t have (aren’t aware of).

Therefore, although introducing this epistemic sense of having a reason gives some substance to the claim that there is a distinction between there being a reason for you to act and your having a reason, the distinction cannot help opponents of factualism, because it *presupposes* factualism. For the epistemic sense of having reasons says that the reasons you ‘have’ or fail to have for acting are a subset of the reasons there are for you to act. And if the reasons there are for you to act are facts, then, the reasons you have, or fail to have, for acting are also facts. In other words, when we introduce this epistemic sense of having reasons, it is possible to distinguish between the reasons there are for you and the reasons you have, but only because you might not be aware of all the facts that are reasons for you. But when you are aware of reasons, what you are aware of are facts.

To sum up the discussion so far. We have identified two senses in which you may be said to have a reason for acting, a reason that favours your action. One is the pleonastic sense, which I claimed is the primary one of having reasons, and according to which, for you to have a reason for acting is just for there to be a fact that is a reason for you to act. The other, the

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<sup>12</sup> See Hyman (1999, 2015) and McDowell (2013) for the use of those metaphors. Most of the authors listed in fn. 1, among others, endorse the knowledge condition on acting for a reason.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Dancy (2011), Locke (2015) and Hughes (2014).

epistemic (or non-pleonastic) sense, is the one in which for you to have a reason for acting is for you to be aware of a fact that is a reason for you to act. In the first sense, the set of the reasons there are and the set of the reasons you have are coextensive. In the second sense, the set of the reasons you have is a subset of the set of the reasons there are. Since the reasons there are for you to act are facts, both senses of ‘having reasons’ that favour actions imply that reasons that favour actions are facts. So far, then, we have found no sense for the claim that the reasons you have that favour actions can be anything other than facts.

I shall finish this section by examining a suggestion by Mark Schroeder that might seem to undermine factualism. Schroeder’s idea is that one can have reasons that are false beliefs – only what one then has are *subjective* reasons. According to Schroeder, there are, corresponding to the two senses of ‘have’ described above, two senses of the word ‘reason’: an objective sense and a subjective sense. Schroeder explains what these senses are through the example of Freddie and Ronnie already encountered. The fact that there will be dancing at the party tonight is a reason, in the ‘objective’ sense of the word, for both Ronnie and Freddie to go to the party tonight. But,

in some sense or other, Freddie, unlike Ronnie, has this reason, since he knows about it, and Ronnie does not. This second sense of ‘has a reason’ is the one I will ... distinguish as the *subjective* sense of ‘reason’ (2008: 59).

Schroeder’s concept of a subjective reason is puzzling. First, the idea that there are two senses of both ‘has’ and ‘reason’ as explained in this passage seems like double-counting. If we accept that there are the pleonastic and the epistemic senses of ‘having reasons’, it is obscure what Schroeder means when he says that there are also two senses of ‘reason’ at play here: what are they? The word ‘reason’ doesn’t seem to have a different sense in the statements: ‘There is a reason for Freddie’ and ‘Freddie is aware of a reason’, given that the reason Freddie is aware of (a reason he has in the epistemic sense) is one and the same thing as the reason there is for him (a reason he has in the pleonastic sense): it is the same fact, to which Freddie stands in what Schroeder says are two relations: ‘\_is a reason for\_’ and ‘\_ has \_ as a reason’.<sup>14</sup> Schroeder uses first the label ‘objective reason’ to refer to this fact on account of Freddie’s standing to it in the first relation, and then the label ‘subjective reason’ to refer to it too, on account of Freddie’s standing to it in the second relation (being aware of that reason). But it is doubtful that these

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<sup>14</sup> Schroeder writes: ‘I don’t believe there is any such category of thing, reason, such that objective and subjective reasons are two sub-varieties of reasons’ (Schroeder 2008: 60, fn.1). What is unclear is what is the sense of ‘reason’ in which false beliefs are a kind of normative reason.

involve two senses of the word ‘reason’. Second, this suggests that subjective reasons, the reasons we ‘have’ by virtue of being aware of facts, are simply a subset of the objective reasons there are for us; and even if we stand in different relations to members of this subset, that doesn’t seem enough to change the meaning of the word ‘reason’.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, if this is right then, contrary to what Schroeder says, the relation ‘\_ has \_ as a subjective reason’ is a ‘restriction’ on the relation ‘\_ has \_ as an objective reason’.

It is true that Schroeder also claims that Freddie could have the same subjective reason to go to the party even if there wasn’t going to be dancing – so long as he believed that there was going to be dancing.<sup>16</sup> But in fact, if there wasn’t going to be dancing, then the subjective reason Freddie would have could not be the same as the one in the example, because the subjective reason he has in the example is the fact that there was going to be dancing at the party and if there wasn’t going to be dancing, there wouldn’t be such a fact.<sup>17</sup> So, what would his subjective reason be in that case? Schroeder says that it would be his false belief (i.e. the false proposition) that there will be dancing. But now it seems that the word ‘reason’ in this statement *would have* a different sense from the one it had in saying that Freddie has a *subjective* reason because he knows about the dancing. For in the latter, ‘subjective reason’ refers to a fact that favours his going to the party, and of which Freddie is aware but in the latter, where there’s no dancing, ‘subjective reason’ cannot refer to that. As we noted above, a reason favours an action because it concerns some good-making feature of the action. A falsehood about an action doesn’t describe any good-making feature that the action has. If there is not going to be any dancing at the party, going to the party doesn’t have the good-making feature that Freddie will enjoy himself by going to the party. Therefore, the claim that Freddie would have a subjective reason in that case would have to mean something different from what the same claim meant in the knowledge case. And, *crucially*, it would have to mean something that didn’t involve a reference to favouring actions.

So what Schroeder says suggests that, rather than two senses of ‘reason’, the subjective and the objective senses, there are two types of ‘subjective reasons’: true and false ones, which

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Schroeder thinks that subjective reasons, the reasons we have, are contents of beliefs (propositions) and never what objective reasons are (facts). But his remarks, for instance in the passage above, speak against that interpretation and, anyway, it is hard to see what arguments could be given to support this restricted view of the reasons we have.

<sup>16</sup> Hornsby’s distinction between (F)-type reasons and (B)-Type reasons in Hornsby (2008) could be interpreted along the same lines. However, her concerns in that paper are quite different from Schroeder’s; she uses her distinction to emphasise the importance of knowledge in (central cases of) *acting for* reasons.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Freddie could have the same subjective reason if he merely believed truly but didn’t know that there was going to be dancing at the party and here ‘reason’ would still be a fact that favours an action.

respectively are a type that favours and a type that cannot favour actions. But then, these false subjective reasons, whatever they are, are not among the reasons that favour actions, any more than fake Picassos are a type of Picasso one might own, fool's gold a type of gold from which to make jewellery, or 'alternative facts' a type of fact one can meaningfully defend at a press conference.

So, the distinction between there being a reason and having a reason, under any of the possible interpretations examined, including the idea of 'having subjective reasons', doesn't help to undermine the view that the reasons that favour actions are facts. One may wonder, however, why philosophers have been led to think that it does. I now turn to that question.

#### 9.4 FALSE BELIEFS, RATIONALITY AND REASONS

It is undeniable that we treat many of our false beliefs as reasons that favour actions, although of course not under the description 'false belief': we treat what, unknown to us, are falsehoods we believe as premises in our reasoning about what to do; we offer them as answers to questions asking us to justify why we did what we did; we offer them as justifying our censure of the actions of others, and as advice concerning what they should do. But it's a further step to say that when we do that, the falsehoods we believe are reasons we have that favour those things.

There are at least three related considerations that have led philosophers to take this step. One is that when you act guided by false beliefs you very often act rationally. The second is that, in such cases, it would be wrong to say that you acted 'for no reason'. Finally, people who act guided by their false beliefs are sometimes free from criticism: we cannot fault them for acting as they did. And that, the thinking goes, must be because in acting so they were doing what they *had* reason to do. And the only plausible candidate for the reason they had is their false belief.

Consider, for example, how Schroeder reaches the conclusion that Freddie could have a reason that is a false belief. His argument begins as follows:

We know that Freddie and Ronnie are different in some interesting way, because this manifests itself in what we can *reasonably expect them* to do, what we can *criticize them as irrational* for failing to do, and when we can hold that they have *acted for a reason*. This is why we said that Freddie, unlike Ronnie, has the reason to go to the party. (Schroeder 2008: 66, my italics).

The idea here is that since Freddie knew about the dancing, three things are true of him: that we can reasonably expect him to go to the party, that it would be rational of him to go, and that he could go to the party *for that* reason. None of these things is true of Ronnie, who also likes parties but knows nothing about the dancing and who, therefore, unlike Freddie, ‘has’ no reason to go (i.e. is not aware of the reason).<sup>18</sup> Schroeder goes on:

Once we notice that the relevant difference between Freddie and Ronnie is that Freddie and not Ronnie *believes* that there will be dancing at the party, why should we hold that it matters, for this difference, whether there really *is* going to be dancing at the party? If, according to our best judgments about the case, Ronnie and Freddie differ in this way whether or not there is in fact going to be dancing at the party, then we should allow that what matters for whether Freddie *has* the reason to go is not whether it is the case at all, but merely whether he believes it. (Schroeder 2008: 66).

The argument is unconvincing. For, in the original example, the relevant difference is that Freddie but not Ronnie *knows* that there will be dancing. That is why Freddie has (i.e., is aware of) a reason that Ronnie lacks. And, regarding *that* difference, it can scarcely be said that it doesn’t matter whether there really is going to be dancing at the party: if there isn’t going to be dancing, then Freddie could not have that reason. So the fact about dancing is crucial to the difference between them. Schroeder claims that the difference between them that explains why only Freddie has a reason is not knowledge but rather belief, namely that ‘Freddie and not Ronnie *believes* that there will be dancing at the party’. But this claim presupposes that belief is all that matters for having reasons and so it cannot be used to support the conclusion that what determines whether one has a reason is not whether what one believes is the case but only whether one believes what one does.

Of course, as Schroeder suggests, the facts about dancing might have been different, and then Ronnie and Freddie would differ, not in respect of what they know but in respect of what they *believe* about whether or not there was going to be dancing at the party. But, in that scenario, it is no longer legitimate for Schroeder to assume that Freddie would still *have a reason* to go to the party if that is to be construed as meaning that his (false) belief would still favour his going to the party. That is what is at issue and the argument above says nothing to support the claim that he does.

One might respond that the claim that Freddie has a reason is supported, precisely, by the considerations about rationality and explanation noted earlier. First, even if there wasn’t

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<sup>18</sup> Schroeder also uses the familiar example, derived from Williams (1981), of Bernie and the case of the dubious gin-and-tonic to argue his case, but the basic ideas are the same as those outlined above.

going to be dancing, it would be perfectly rational for Freddie to go to the party, so long as it was reasonable of him to believe that there was going to be dancing. Besides, if Freddie went to the party, we would have no grounds for criticising him, given what he reasonably believed. Nor would it be right to say, in that case, that Freddie went to the party for no reason. And all of these show that Freddie *had* a reason to go to the party, for how could his going to the party be rational, blameless and done for a reason, if not because he had a reason to go? And, if he had a reason to go, what could his reason be if not his false belief?<sup>19</sup>

I agree that, in the example, it would be rational of Freddie to go to the party and that he might be free from criticism for going. But we can account for this in at least two different ways. One is by saying that rationality and this sort of immunity to criticism require acting for reasons, and to try to identify the reasons for which Freddie acts. Another is by saying that it is possible to act rationally and be free from this sort of blame while being guided by considerations that are not reasons.

Anti-causalists often argue in the first way that, since acting rationally is acting on the undefeated reasons one has, the false belief that motivated Freddie to go was a reason he had and on which he acted. It should be noted, however, that it is possible to retain that conception of rationality while denying that Freddie's reason was his false belief. Instead, one might argue that Freddie's reasons were facts that made his false belief rational. After all, if Freddie simply made up the idea that there would be dancing at the party with no evidence for it, his going to the party motivated by this false belief would be neither rational nor blameless, whether there was going to be dancing or not. I shall not assess whether this is a viable option, because there is, I think, a preferable alternative, which is to embrace a different conception of rationality.<sup>20</sup>

According to this alternative, although acting on the undefeated reasons there are for us, given certain conditions, is acting rationally, we may also act rationally when we are guided by what we (falsely) take to be undefeated reasons to so act. Acting rationally is, on this view, a matter of responding appropriately to considerations that appear to us, rightly or wrongly, to be reasons. When some of those considerations are falsehoods that appear to us to be reasons, the falsehoods are not reasons we have. Still, as Niko Kolodny puts it, this situation may seem to

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<sup>19</sup> See also Comesaña and McGrath (2014)'s discussion of the rationality of cases where agents act on false beliefs, and my response in Alvarez (2016a).

<sup>20</sup> See Lord (2010) for a suggestion along these lines. While I think Lord is right that those facts are reasons that contribute to the rationality of the action, I do not find his account wholly satisfactory – partly because it depends on what seems to me too narrow a view of rationality.

create ‘normative pressure’ for us to do certain things. But the pressure, like the false beliefs, is merely an appearance of the real thing. And, as he explains:

When we advise someone that he ‘ought rationally’ to have some attitude, we aim not to offer him a reason that we believe [he] has for that attitude—as we do with normal advice—but instead to draw his attention to a reason that he believes he has. We are saying, in effect: ‘As it seems to you, you have reason to have that attitude.’ The normative pressure, so to speak, that the advisee then feels to comply with the rational requirement, by forming the attitude, derives from how things seem to him—from the reason that, as it appears to him, he has. Thus, ..., it will always seem to one, when one is subject to a rational requirement, that one has a reason ... to comply with it: namely, the reason to form (or drop) the attitude that, in so far as one satisfies the antecedent of the requirement, one already believes one has (or lacks). This is what gives the ‘ought’ of rationality its normative force—or, rather, its seeming normative force (Kolodny 2005: 513).

As the passage makes clear, one may feel the ‘normative pressure’ of reasons when one believes something false and take it to be a reason for acting. In such cases, it can be rational for one to act guided by those false beliefs. However, acting rationally in such cases does not consist in acting for reasons one has but rather in acting guided by false beliefs that seem to one to give one reason to act. Therefore, it would indeed be rational of Freddie to go to the party, given his belief. But that is not because his false belief is a reason he has that favours going. It is because that false belief, though lacking genuine normative force, appears to Freddie, who thinks it true, to have genuine normative force.

What of the suggestion that when someone acts on the grounds of a false belief it would be wrong to say that he acts for no reason? If Freddie goes to the party because he believes mistakenly that there will be dancing, would it be false to say that he went to the party ‘for no reason’? We must tread carefully here.

First, it would not be false to say that his mistaken belief that there’d be dancing was not a reason he had to go to the party. And, if that was the only consideration that led him to go to the party, it would not be false to say that he went for no reason. But it might be misleading to say so.<sup>21</sup> This is because there are other, quite different kinds of case, where we say also that someone acted for no reason and saying it in Freddie’s case might invite confusion with those cases. One kind of case is when you do something simply on impulse, because you feel like it. You then do what you do ‘for no reason’. Another type of case is when you do something guided by a true belief that does not favour your doing what you did, as might be the case when

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<sup>21</sup> See Alvarez (2010: § 5.3.2) for a detailed discussion of this point.

you refuse to eat a delicious apple simply because it's somewhat misshapen. And then we have cases like Freddie's where he believes something false –that there will be dancing at the party– which, if true, would be a reason he would have, because it *would favour* his going to the party. In these cases, it might be misleading to say that in acting on that false belief, the agent did not act for a reason or that he acted 'for no reason' – misleading because it might suggest that the agent wasn't motivated by anything to go to the party, which is false. All the same, it would be true – in our example, it would be true that Freddie went to the party for no reason. Consider the Gricean implicatures of the case. If I say that Freddie went to the party for no reason, I assert that he didn't have a reason for going and 'implicate' that nothing motivated him to go. But I can cancel the implicature without denying the truth that he lacked a reason: 'Freddie went to the party for no reason since there was no dancing, although he went motivated by the false belief that there would be dancing' is not a contradiction. Therefore, although we can explain Freddie's action by reference to his false belief: he went to the party because he had that false belief, and that makes his action intelligible, the false belief was not a reason he had that favoured his going and, to that extent, Freddie went to the party for no reason.

So the argument that acting on a false belief is not the same as acting for no reason, like the arguments about explanation and rationality, fails. None of these arguments support the thought that false beliefs can favour anything and hence that they can be reasons one has for acting. A false belief which, if true, would favour certain actions is not a belief that *does* favour those actions and hence it is not a reason one has.

## 9.5 CONCLUSION

The reasons we have and are aware of, together with our false beliefs, can determine whether we act rationally, are free from criticism, or are intelligible to others and to ourselves. But those are not the only things that matter when it comes to having reasons, for it also matters whether we do what is right for us to do or not do, for instance, whether someone is harmed through our actions, or whether a different course of action would be more just. A miscarriage of justice can happen because, through non-culpable ignorance of the facts that determine the demands of justice in the case, an innocent person is convicted. And the reasons we have, whether we are aware of them or not, determine what is right for us to do. When we act following the undefeated reasons we have to act, we do what is right for us to do.

It does not follow from this that when we don't act so, we act irrationally, or are open to criticism or blame for acting as we do. For it is possible to act and believe rationally and to be



free from criticism when acting guided by false beliefs. When we are so guided, those beliefs are not reasons we have, but our failure to do what is right for us to do may be neither culpable nor a manifestation of irrationality, and our actions may be perfectly intelligible.

The possibility of acting rationally and blamelessly while acting guided by our false beliefs leads some to the view that a false belief can be a reason you have because, they say, it favours the actions you undertake. I have examined an attempt to vindicate this claim based on an alleged distinction between the reasons you have and the reasons there are, and have found it unpersuasive. I hope to have shown that the distinction, however understood, and even when combined with considerations of rationality, criticism or explanation, does not provide grounds for abandoning the view that the reasons you have that favour your actions must be reasons that there are for you to so act. And those reasons are facts.<sup>22</sup>

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